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AUTHOR Roberts, Alasdair  
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## ABSTRACT

A study surveyed parents (n=329) of 1989 and prospective 1990 first-year primary school entrants in Scotland's Western Isles concerning Gaelic-English bilingual education policy. Results indicate only 39% of 4- and 5-year-olds had two native Gaelic-speaking parents, although attitudes toward the language were very positive. Half the parents read Gaelic-language books to their children, although availability of such materials was an issue. It appeared most parents were moderately well-informed about school language policy, while some uncertainty about the distinction between Gaelic-medium and bilingual instruction was found. About 86% of parents would like their children to be bilingual even when they themselves are not. However, it emerged from interviews that parents understood bilingualism as the ability to speak Gaelic and English, not necessarily write and read them at the same level. About 71% supported the idea of Gaelic-medium education, but it was not clear whether these supported teaching of all subjects in Gaelic. Approximately half the parents surveyed said they would take advantage of Gaelic-medium instruction if offered. Fewer than one-quarter favored education entirely in Gaelic ending by the fourth year of elementary school, while 41% wanted Gaelic emphasized throughout elementary school. Recommendations are made tentatively in view of the study's limitations; however, it is proposed that Gaelic-medium education should continue, that its availability should be made clear to parents, that schools as an important source of Gaelic books should be stressed, and that research on various aspects of this curriculum should be conducted. (MSE)

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# SPOTLIGHTS



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## Gaelic across the Curriculum? Parental Attitudes to Gaelic-Medium Education in the Western Isles

*Alasdair Roberts*

*Northern College of Education, Aberdeen Campus*

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*Gaelic-medium education is an optional extension of the bilingual policy which has been applied to all schools of the Western Isles during the 1980s. The aim of the bilingual policy is that Gaelic-speaking children will be as literate and fluent in Gaelic as in English by Primary 7, and that provision will be made at all stages of primary education for English-speaking children to learn Gaelic as a second language in accordance with the wishes of their parents.*

*The first Gaelic-medium unit teaching school entrants through Gaelic across the curriculum opened in 1986 and the number of such units within primary schools has since risen to 11.*

- *What is the position of Gaelic in the homes of pre-school children in the Western Isles?*
- *How do parents view the option of education through the medium of Gaelic?*
- *How long after Primary 1 do they think that Gaelic should continue as the language of learning, teaching and resources?*

*Comhairle nan Eilean (the Western Isles Islands Council) commissioned a questionnaire and interview survey involving the parents of all 1989 Primary 1 school entrants and all prospective 1990 entrants in an attempt to estimate future levels of demand for Gaelic-medium education.*

### GAELIC IN HOME AND PLAYGROUP

Interviews confirmed and illustrated the response to the first questionnaire item which showed that only 39% of the sampled 4- and 5-year-old age groups had two parents who were native-speakers. In the Western Isles a clear majority of children are now coming to school from homes where Gaelic is not 'normally' spoken (compare 31% 'sometimes' for homes with one Gaelic-speaking parent). There is nevertheless a great deal of goodwill towards the language among parents of young children and a quite general agreement which extends well beyond native-speakers that, during the early years when language is being acquired, Western Isles children should be encouraged to speak Gaelic.

Just over half of the parents reported reading or discussing Gaelic books at home with their children. Those who did not were either deterred by the fact that they could not read Gaelic or by the inaccessibility of books in their area. Some thought the price of books too high, while others claimed that the local library van contained only English pre-school books. Uniquely in the Western Isles, volunteers have been taking pre-school Gaelic books into homes; these visits were appreciated and deserve to be made more generally available. Shops, vans and visitors are probably less important as sources of Gaelic books for home than the local school, however. Pre-school children benefit from what comes home in the schoolbag of an older brother or sister, and this could become a positive aspect of policy.

At the end of the 1980s playgroups perceived as 'Gaelic only' were a 1 in 5 minority in the Western Isles (21% of parents so responding of the 86% whose child had attended or would be attending playgroup) although Gaelic was used more widely in what might be called bilingual playgroups. One challenge facing the Gaelic playgroup movement CNSA (*Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich*) with support from the Council is the organisation of an effective Gaelic immersion experience at pre-school level for children whose home language is mainly or entirely English: a single weekly session of Gaelic is certainly not enough for learners. Another problem for the wider community is the identification of playleaders for the bilingual groups who are at least capable of responding to young native-speakers in their own language.

#### **Gaelic-Medium Education and Mainstream Bilingual Education**

The fact that 85% responded positively to the question, 'Do you understand what is meant by Gaelic-medium education within the Western Isles bilingual policy?' seems to vindicate *Comhairle nan Eilean*'s confidence that the most relevant group of parents in terms of future demand has been sufficiently informed. An unsupported percentage response can be misleading, however, as there was evidence from interviews and from a later questionnaire item that parents were confused about the distinction between mainstream bilingual education and education through the medium of Gaelic. Any policy which is based on response to parental demand must give serious attention to explaining the relationship between bilingual education, as variously interpreted in practice, and the innovation of Gaelic-medium education.

There is still a degree of uncertainty among the parents of these young children about how the bilingual policy works in primary schools. 'Occasional Gaelic lessons' (the commonest perception at 41%) is a description of what happened in Western Isles primary schools before the Bilingual Project (1975-81) and may derive to some extent from respondents' memories of their own schooldays, mixed up with an accurate enough impression that there are fewer formal 'lessons' in modern primary education. A similar proportion thought that there was not a strong enough emphasis on Gaelic in their local primary schools, although interviews and written comment showed that parents were generally appreciative of what was being attempted by staff.

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of Western Isles parents (86%) would like their children to be bilingual, even when they themselves are not. It appeared from interviews, however, that most parents understood bilingualism mainly as the ability to speak both languages, rather than to read and write Gaelic at the same level as English (which is the Western Isles bilingual policy for native-speakers). Another view which emerged was that bilingualism should not be achieved at the expense of other curricular areas, particularly English, since the parents of even these very young children were concerned about future job prospects.

## SUPPORT FOR GAELIC-MEDIUM EDUCATION

'Do you support the idea of Gaelic-medium education as part of the Western Isles bilingual policy?' might be taken as the most straightforward and important question in the survey, and the 71% positive response a sufficient justification for making this form of provision a standard option in every school. But it is possible to be in favour of Gaelic-medium education without having the desire to involve one's own child. In Stornoway (where, because of the dominance of English, a high future uptake of Gaelic-medium education must seem unlikely) parents gave stronger assent to this question than did those of rural Lewis where most of the expansion of Gaelic-medium units would inevitably take place.

Furthermore, it was not always clear that pro-Gaelic opinion actually favoured the teaching of all subjects through Gaelic (mathematics has recently become somewhat controversial in terms of the Gaelic counting system, for example). A clear majority of the parents approached signalled their support for Gaelic-medium education but this appears to have been partly intended as an expression of general support for Gaelic and partly to indicate that the option should be left open for other people's children. The policy of *Comhairle nan Eilean*, of course, is that Gaelic-medium education should be made more widely available but always as an option.

## ENROLMENT IN GAELIC-MEDIUM UNITS

When the survey was conducted the Council's policy was one of centralising Gaelic-medium education in units accessible to their surrounding areas. A key question therefore concerned the number of parents who would use a Gaelic-medium unit if one were to be opened within reasonable travelling distance: Barra has none, for example. Combining the 67 respondents who said they had enrolled or would enrol a child in an existing unit with the 96 who said they would enrol their child if one were made available, it appeared that 162 sets of parents supported Gaelic-medium education for their own children. This is 49% of the 329 who returned questionnaires and justifies the conclusion that about half of the parents of 4- and 5-year-olds in the Western Isles support actual or potential Gaelic-medium units, as distinct from the larger group (71%) who support Gaelic-medium education as part of the bilingual policy. Taking these two figures together, majority support for Gaelic-medium education can be claimed. This is a remarkably positive response to a recent innovation within a long tradition of linguistic pessimism.

## AGES AND STAGES

To an outside evaluator, it appears that the least controversial definition of Gaelic-medium education, and the one which doubtful parents are most likely to accept for their children at the stage of starting school, is one in which Gaelic is the language of learning, teaching and resources during the early stages of school, with English coming towards the end of what used to be called the infant department. Many teachers have traditionally operated a policy of using oral Gaelic with young native-speakers in first year primary while making the inevitable start to reading schemes in English. Even in the pioneering Gaelic-medium schools which were opened in Glasgow and Inverness in 1985, moreover, English reading books are introduced at the end of Primary 2 and Primary 3 respectively (Fraser, 1989).

Parents were not particularly inclined towards the cautious option, however. Fewer than one set of parents in four (still a solid minority) was in favour of education entirely through Gaelic ending by Primary 4 - the latest contact with a child's first teacher in a two-teacher school, while 41% wanted 'Gaelic emphasised strongly from Primary 1 to Primary 7'. The main objections made by parents to a partial, age-staged approach to Gaelic-medium education were connected with the transition phase. Others expressed a related concern over segregation for children enrolled in a Gaelic unit

within a school where the education was mostly in English. Even parents of children who had yet to enter school when the questionnaire was completed, had a good, perhaps instinctive, understanding of the need for continuity in education.

But the main point to be taken from the response to this final questionnaire item on ages and stages is that parents were not certain of the distinction between Gaelic-medium education and bilingual education. This became clear during interviews. A combination of questionnaire items shows a solid majority for a stronger emphasis on Gaelic throughout the primary school, but the extent to which parents wished education to be conducted through the medium of Gaelic at the top end of the school is not yet clear. It is unlikely to become clear until this has been experienced in the upper stages of primary education by teachers, children and parents.

## CONCLUSIONS

This survey is about the future of Gaelic, hitherto considered mainly in terms of its long history of decline as it disappeared from one part of Scotland after another. 'Lesser spoken' languages represent the cultures of forty million people in western Europe, and the dramatic events in eastern Europe at the start of the 1990s must engender optimism about the continuing vigour of cultures and languages as far as the Atlantic edge of the continent. *Comhairle nan Eilean* is making determined efforts to implement policy. The educational press has posed the problem as one of alternatives: 'To lead or to heed... Whether, as the Western Isles Council believes, it is nobler to respond to parental demand for Gaelic education; or, as its critics demand, to take up arms and force the pace.' (*Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 13.10.89).

Even before the Council began to 'take up arms' (a stronger policy seems to be emerging) that was always a false option. The evidence from this survey is that parents are looking to *Comhairle nan Eilean* for the implementation of clear policies but are not ready for the general application of something which is still experimental beyond the early stages of primary education. Upper primary teachers, after all, have no experience of Gaelic-medium education (although the same could be said of early stages teachers when the Gaelic-medium option was first made available, and they have coped well). As the Director of Education put it in October 1989, 'One can have nothing but admiration for the teaching staff who had to become jugglers to deal with the mother-tongue learners, the second language learners, and the foreign language learners.' Parental opinion ranges from positive to negative in the homes of all these groups of children, and educational policies need to be devised to meet their varying needs.

The maintenance of minority languages is one of the great cultural and educational issues of the age. The rising generation of Western Isles children and their parents present the last chance for the survival of Scottish Gaelic into the next century in one of its few remaining heartlands. The generally positive attitude of parents towards the language was sometimes expressed to the interviewers as 'Gaelic will never die' but the evidence of its precarious state in the homes of the Western Isles is there for all to see. It is almost routine for reports to end with a call for more research. Here the case for keeping a monitoring eye on the views of these two cohorts of parents, as their children proceed through the various levels of education, must be sufficiently obvious. *Comhairle nan Eilean* has a duty to lead and heed parental opinion in the years to come.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

It may not be appropriate to make recommendations about educational policy on the basis of parental attitudes, particularly since the survey was conducted quickly by an outsider and offers no more than a snapshot, possibly blurred, of what parents of future pupils thought at the time. However certain points seem worth listing.

- Within the limits set for public expenditure, Gaelic-medium education should continue to be provided in response to parental demand.
- The availability of Gaelic-medium units in a given area should be explained to parents when they enrol their children for school.
- The policy should be explained to parents with reference to learning and teaching and the curriculum at different levels of the primary school.
- The pre-school home-visiting programme to introduce Gaelic books to homes is welcomed by parents and should be made more generally available.
- Since schools are in fact an important source of Gaelic books in the homes of pre-school children this should become a positive aspect of policy.
- Despite the voluntary nature of the playgroup movement more Council-backed resources and educational planning are needed at the pre-school level.
- Both at playgroup and school account should be taken of the varying needs of children in terms of learning through Gaelic.
- Inter-authority co-operation on Gaelic curricular development should include the of modelling of good Gaelic-medium practice in upper primary.
- Research should be conducted on the learning and development of children in Gaelic-medium units and on styles of classroom management.
- Parents with children experiencing Gaelic-medium education should be included in research covering language and learning in home and school.
- Attitudes of all parents of 1989 and 1990 children (the data base) should be monitored as Gaelic-medium education becomes better understood.

*NOTE: The Western Isles Bilingual Project (1975-81) was evaluated by the project team (Murray and Morrison) and by a research team (McIntyre and Mitchell) based at Stirling University - see references below. The first unit teaching school entrants through the medium of Gaelic across the curriculum was opened at Breasclete School, Callanish, in 1986. There are now 7 such units with another 4 planned for session 1990-91. This survey was carried out during the summer of 1989. A 61% response was received to the questionnaire survey, with two-thirds of those adding written comment. Structured interviews were conducted with a 1 in 10 sample of those approached, involving visits to 55 homes. The full report breaks down questionnaire responses into three areas: rural north, Stornoway and rural south. It is available from A Roberts, Northern College, Aberdeen Campus, Hilton Place, Aberdeen AB9 1FA at £2.50.*

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